

**The Vintage Handicap:
Can a Young University Achieve World-Class Status?**

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What chance does a university stand to be among the best, if it does not have hundreds of years of experience? The top 10 universities in the latest Shanghai Academic Ranking of World Universities ranking (2011) were all founded before 1900, and two are more than eight centuries old. As is the case with good wines, academic excellence requires a wealth of expertise, careful care, and a long maturity period.

However, this notion has been challenged recently on several counts. First, the regular publication of annual global rankings appears to imply that significant progress could be expected from one year to the other. Second, the decision of several countries to step up investment in support of their elite universities, under various “Excellence Initiatives,” shows their determination to obtain drastic improvement within a few years. Finally, several universities were

recently created in emerging economies (i.e., Kazakhstan and Saudi Arabia), with the declared ambition of rapidly becoming “world-class.”

Based on the publication of the first “Under Fifty” ranking by *Times Higher Education*, which lists the most promising emerging universities in the world, is it realistic to believe that a university could reach the top at an accelerated pace? To address this question, this article draws on the findings of recent publications, which have looked at the challenge of establishing world-class universities.

THE WEIGHT OF TRADITION

The conceptual framework developed to understand the outstanding results of world-class universities—highly sought graduates, leading-edge research, and dynamic technology transfer—singled out three complementary sets of factors at play: (a) a high concentration of talent (faculty and students), (b) abundant resources to offer a rich learning environment and facilitate advanced research, and (c) favorable governance features that encourage strategic vision, innovation, and flexibility.

Looking at these factors, clearly there is no shortcut for achieving the concentration of academic and financial resources needed, to become a world-class university. Developing a strong culture of excellence, especially in research, is the result of incremental progress and consolidation over several decades, sometimes centuries.

But being an old university is no guarantee of academic excellence. The first Shanghai global ranking, published in 2003, did not give historical brand names, such as Bologna (ranked 201–251), Heidelberg (ranked 58), or Sorbonne (ranked 65)—a standing commensurate with their international reputation. These

institutions simply did not stack up against universities with adequate funding, modern governance, research talent, and institutional autonomy—absolutely fundamental elements of a world-class university.

THE FAST MOVERS

Four of the case studies, analyzed in *The Road to Academic Excellence*, document examples of new institutions, which have achieved preeminence in a few decades. The most successful four institutions, using the criterion of their position in the Shanghai and *Times Higher Education* rankings, are the Indian Institutes of Technology, the National University of Singapore, Hong Kong University of Science and Technology, and the Pohang University of Science and Technology, in South Korea. The South Korean and Hong Kong universities came first and third in the “Under Fifty” ranking.

From the beginning, the Hong Kong University of Science and Technology has benefited from a unique combination of favorable factors. At a critical moment of transformation for the entire territory, as a result of the handover to China, the new university was established with a clear vision, strong leadership, an outstanding academic body, an innovative educational model, ample resources, and a supportive governance framework.

Is this example too exceptional to offer useful lessons? The various case studies documented in *The Road to Academic Excellence* highlight important generic elements. Among the key “accelerating factors” supporting the quest for excellence, the most influential appears to be reliance on the diaspora. As shown by the cases of the Pohang University of Science and Technology and Hong Kong University of Science and Technology, bringing overseas scholars back to their

country of origin is an effective way of rapidly building up the academic strength of an institution. Combined to this, a second element seen in the case studies is the use of English as the main working language, which enhances greatly the ability of an institution to attract highly qualified foreign academics, as the National University of Singapore has managed to accomplish.

Concentrating on niche areas, such as the science and engineering disciplines, is a third manner of achieving a critical mass more rapidly, as illustrated by the experiences of the Pohang University of Science and Technology, the Indian Institutes of Technology, and the Hong Kong University of Science and Technology. Two of the most dynamic European institutions, ETH Zürich (Federal Institute of Technology of Zürich) and EPFL Lausanne (Federal Institute of Technology of Lausanne), are also engineering schools.

A fourth approach consists of using benchmarking to orient an institution's upgrading efforts. Shanghai Jiao Tong University, for instance, anchored its strategic planning work in careful comparisons with leading Chinese universities, first, moving later to include peer foreign universities in the benchmarking exercise.

A final way of driving improvements quickly is to introduce curriculum and pedagogical innovations. The Hong Kong University of Science and Technology, for example, was the first US-style university in Hong Kong. The Higher School of Economics in Moscow was among the first Russian institutions to offer a curriculum that integrates teaching and research. These kinds of innovative features—part of the “late comer advantage”—are crucial for new institutions seeking to entice students away from existing universities.

The trajectory of the universities analyzed in *The Road to Academic Excellence* suggests that it may be easier to reach world-class status by establishing a new institution than by attempting to upgrade an existing one. This does not mean that it is impossible for an existing university to improve significantly, but it is more challenging to create a culture of excellence where one did not flourish. The Danish University of Aarhus has been undergoing impressive changes under the impetus of an innovative rector, keen on encouraging progress “without a burning platform,” just as the University of the South Pacific’s vice-chancellor has been leading strategic change under the banner of “good is not good enough.”

CONCLUSION

Today’s leading universities are enjoying what could be called the “vintage” element. But, in recent years, the recognition that tertiary education is part of a country’s competitive advantage has changed how governments look at the role of universities. There is a growing belief that, with proper leadership and investment, existing universities can be drastically transformed into world-class institutions, over a relatively short period. While not impossible, creating a top university—through upgrading—poses, however, greater challenges than developing a new institution from scratch.

In either case, it is clear that building excellence remains a long-term endeavor, requiring measured approaches for sustainability. Even those institutions able to take advantage of the kinds of accelerating factors, mentioned in this article, should bear in mind that taking a research university to the top requires decades of relentless efforts. Unlike a vintage wine which will vary in

taste and quality from year to year, a university on the path to academic excellence should stay the course and keep the long view at all times. As Daniel Lincoln recently wrote, "excellence, like all things of abiding value, is a marathon, not a sprint."